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## France Hopes to Jumpstart Its Arms Sales with the New Iraqi Government

By  
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[The following article is originally appeared in *The Washington Post*, July 4, 2009.]

France, which was an important weapons supplier to Saddam Hussein, has set out to revive its once-flourishing arms sales and training relationship with the new Iraqi government put in place by the United States. The effort has attracted attention because, under former President Jacques Chirac, France opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and stayed aloof from the coalition of allies that assisted the United States during the bloody occupation that has followed.

At stake, specialists here said, are billions of dollars in potential arms sales and training contracts as the Iraqi military seeks to rebuild from the devastation wrought by United Nations (U.N.) sanctions and then by U.S. forces as they took over the country, destroyed Hussein's Sunni-led military establishment, and set up a new order dominated by the Shiite majority.

The United States, as the principal patron with advisers all around Baghdad, could be expected to get top priority in military and other sales as Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government proceeds with the reconstruction, some of it financed by U.S. aid money. But French officials and military specialists said France is counting on a desire of Iraqi officials to diversify their weapons sources and a network of personal relationships established in the 1970s when Chirac as prime minister championed ties with Hussein that continued into the 1980s.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), for instance, have been good customers for French military equipment despite extensive strategic ties with the United States and a long history of buying U.S. weaponry. In recent months, France has been pushing hard to sell the U.A.E. a fleet of sixty Rafale fighter planes, an advanced Dassault Aviation craft that so far has been bought only by the French military.

I think there is indeed a window of opportunity to sell non-American military equipment, said Jean-Pierre Maulny, a military expert at France's International and Strategic Relations Institute. I think the sentiment [among Iraqi officials] today is to not look like they're in the hands of the Americans only.

Maliki's government announced Thursday, during a visit by French Prime Minister François Fillon, that it has concluded a tentative military sales and training agreement with France. The announcement foresaw Iraqi visits to France and French experts training Iraqis. But it did not describe the extent of sales envisioned, the timetable, or the equipment the Iraqi military would consider shopping for in France.

The governments of Iraq and France . . . are looking forward to boosting a brilliant and permanent bilateral relationship and a desire from both sides to develop bilateral cooperation particularly in the arms field, the accord said.

So far, the French military sales effort has resulted in a \$500 million deal for 24 Eurocopter EC-635 light transport and reconnaissance helicopters. Next, according to reports in Paris, the French

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Defense Ministry has proposed selling and the Iraqi Defense Ministry has shown interest in acquiring eighteen modernized Mirage F1 warplanes and another batch of military helicopters.

In announcing the helicopter sales in March, Defense Minister Hervé Morin said a French military attaché would be stationed at the embassy in Baghdad beginning this summer to foster more military sales and training programs.

We want to return to the relations that France had until the 1980s, when a large part of the Iraqi army was trained in France and equipped with French military equipment, Morin added.

The Obama Administration has not taken a public stand on the proposed French military sales. But U.S. relations with France have warmed considerably since the advent of President Obama, who opposed the Bush Administration's Iraq war; and Washington has stressed the need for Maliki's government to assume sovereignty over the country as U.S. troops draw down.

In addition, President Nicolas Sarkozy has emphasized friendship with the United States. In that light, he has increased to 3,000 the number of French soldiers in Afghanistan and returned France to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) integrated military command.

Moreover, the French military sales campaign is only one part of a broad pitch that includes proposals for large-scale civilian sales and French investment in Iraq's long-delayed reconstruction. These are goals advocated by U.S. officials as a way to get Iraq on its feet again.

Sarkozy visited Baghdad in February [2009] to promote French businesses; Maliki was received here in May [2009]. Fillon followed up with his one-day visit on Thursday, bringing along a team of senior French business leaders, including Christophe de Margerie of the French oil giant total.

Whatever the desire of Iraqi officials to buy French equipment, the military's ability to absorb, maintain, and operate modern weaponry remains limited, said François Heisbourg of the Foundation for Strategic Research in Paris. Any sales contract would probably have to include provisions for training and long-term maintenance, he said.

Special correspondent Zaid Sabah in Baghdad contributed to this report.